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Art & Architecture

Paintings by **Mabel Alvarez,** from the early days of L.A. art, go on display Saturday at Orange County Museum of Art. Left: A detail from "In the Garden" (1925).

L.A.'s Punk Eruption

An exhibition looks back at a music scene that shook the city's underground—and still resonates.

By LYNELL GEORGE

It doesn't need a caption. It doesn't need a time stamp. The fed-up frenzy speaks cranked-up decibels.

An anonymous body folded near fetal, caught midair in a free-fall somersault, catapulted into nothing—risky, raucous, without regard to outcome.

From this vantage it's a mosh pit moment, italicized rather than captured. This grainy, strobe-flattened black-and-white Edward Colver photograph titled "Stage Diver" that floats at the center of a wall just a few steps into Track 16 Gallery's "Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk" is just one of many cattleprod-to-memory moments in this retrospective.

Public. Private. Provoking. Punk, in its dawning years, was a carousel of imagery. An encyclopedia of gesture—moving fast forward.

And if you blinked you missed it.

"Forming," which runs through June 5, provides a rare freeze-frame; a formal respects-paying, if you will. From 1976 to 1982, Los Angeles' music scene was probably best-known as mellow host to the LP bands like Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles that permeated the city's drive-time FM airwaves.

Diametrically opposed, rumbling just beneath street level (quite literally in some cases), something else was clamoring. "Misfit men and women who fought against the status quo, cops, boredom and Linda Ronstadt," writes co-curator John Roecker in the show's mission declaration. "All that was required was the ability to think for yourself."

It was life spread out wild across the page—forget the margins. At clubs like Brendan Mullen's seminal Hollywood basement space the Masque, at the Starwood, Whisky-a-Go-Go and downtown's Myron's Ballroom, an untamed wall of sound and thought shook the foundation. It didn't simply defy definition, it rejected it outright.

Photos and artifacts include pages from Exene Cervenka's journal, top; a concert poster from co-curator John Roecker's collection, bottom left; Melanie Nissen's photo of the Germs' Darby Crash with X's Cervenka.

Here, mementos like telephone-pole flyers and posters for bands such as Fear and the Screamers at the Stardust Ballroom (with authenticity-lending staple-gun scars) hang in frames on eggshell walls; the brittle, graffiti-scarred doors from the Masque are propped in place as if useful things; X's Exene Cervenka's costume tiara and richly collaged journal musings are perched on a pedestal beneath plexiglass. Considering it all, there is the vague, anticipatory worry that this context could all be too discordant—precious. Instead, the busy cacophony is dense, rich and fittingly demanding to navigate. Far from minimalist gallery standard, the show looks like a scrapbook, or better—a clipping-and-glossy-papered bedroom wall.

Not simply a glance back at a scene but rather tapping its emotional source, "Forming" was group-curated by a fittingly disparate culture klatch of musicians, journalists, artists, photographers, performers and scenesters, including Roecker, journalist Kristine McKenna, music-art publicist Susan Martin, actor-artist Viggo Mortensen (Cervenka's ex-husband) and Track 16 registrar Holly Myers and its director of exhibitions Pilar Perez. The show examines punk's influence (and its potency) from various perspectives and disciplines.

From installation and performance art to anti-fashion and video. From West Hollywood and East L.A. to Slash magazine and Rodney Bingenheimer's "Rodney on the Roq" (KROQ-FM's iconoclastic radio window on that world). L.A.'s punk aesthetic was less art-school self-conscious than New York, more stylistically diverse (stitching in blues, swamp, punk, rockabilly, ska, techno) than the U.K. The L.A.

"FORMING: THE EARLY DAYS OF L.A. PUNK," Track 16 Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., C-1, Santa Monica. **Dates:** Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Ends June 5. **Price:** Free. **Phone:** (310) 264-4678.

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